

Fiume

The Adriatic City-State & a Comic Interlude

By Herbert Vivian

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FIUME, the coveted city, will be remembered as the chief bone of contention after the Great War; the brief "reign" of d'Annunzio as one of the few really comic interludes of modern history. Until then she enjoyed the proverbial blessing of having practically no history at all, owing successive allegiance to the Lords of Duino, Frangipani, and Walsee until 1471, when the Emperor Frederick III. bought her and added her to Inner Austria. In 1779 Maria Theresa united the city with Hungary, from whom it was wrested by the French in 1809. Austrian again in 1814, restored to Hungary in 1822, handed over to the Crownland of Croatia after the disorders of 1848, Fiume became autonomous under the Hungarian kingdom in 1870, comprising with her suburbs an area of about eleven square miles—a little smaller than San Marino, a little larger than Monaco, as d'Annunzio used to remind his visitors.

After the Great War, Fiume was claimed by both victorious Italy and the new ambitious kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Italy insisted on self-determination for a city whose autonomy was already acknowledged; whose population consisted of 13,000 Italians, 6,900 Illyrians, 6,800

Croats and Slovenes (chiefly in the outskirts), and 1,500 Germans; a city, moreover, which had declared by plébiscite on October 30, 1918, before the victory of the Allies, in favour of union with Italy.

The Southern Slavs retorted that Fiume was promised to Croatia by the Treaty of London, which defined Italy's conditions for entering the war.

"Yes," was the answer, "but we had always been told Croatia hated Serbia and would become an independent State, a buffer against Serbian imperialism. Croatia would have needed an outlet to the sea, but the new Slav kingdom has been already assigned twelve important ports on the Adriatic, and can need no more. We are not claiming Fiume in defiance of our treaty; it is Fiume who is claiming us, and we cannot turn a deaf ear to her cause."

The argument went on interminably at the Peace Conference, and Mr. Wilson once more flouted his own fourteen points by implacably insisting on a surrender to the Slavs. But public opinion was roused in Italy, and her representatives withdrew from the conference rather than give way immediately.

Meanwhile, Anglo-French or Anglo-Annamite troops held the stakes until a sudden compromise at Paris led



FIUME AND ITS NEIGHBOURS



POSTER APPEALS TO ITALIAN PATRIOTISM IN FIUME

When, in the autumn of 1919, the Italian novelist and poet, Gabriele d'Annunzio, established himself so dramatically as Dictator of Fiume, the street walls were plastered with appeals to the patriotic spirit of his compatriots. Those seen in the photograph may be freely translated: "Italy or Death!" "Long Live Gabriele d'Annunzio!" "Who works Fiume ill Him Fiume will kill!"

to a temporary Italian occupation. But the Italian Government eventually yielded to pressure and ordered their troops to withdraw. All Italy protested; Fiume protested loudest of all.

Suddenly her call of distress was heard from an unexpected quarter. On September 12, 1919, when the Italian troops were forsaking Fiume amid the tears of the population, a great cloud of dust was espied on the horizon of the Corso. It was raised by a raging, tearing motor containing a little bald, fiery poet, who had rushed to the rescue in his fifty-seventh year. Instead of putting him to bed with a shout of laughter, the wilder spirits rallied round him and joined in a new Jameson raid, while more sober regulars turned Nelson eyes as he bared his breast and exclaimed dramatically: "Shoot me! Fire at the medals I won in winning your battles!"

Thus Gabriele d'Annunzio—of the Annunciation or of the Advertisement,

as you prefer—established himself as Dictator of Fiume, defying the world's ridicule and the wrath of the Southern Slavs; and there he remained for some seventeen months in an atmosphere of comic opera.

When I visited Fiume I found her very little changed from what she had been twelve years before. There was the same filthy old town huddling on a hill with a Roman arch as the sole sight for travellers; as I approached, my eyes were scorched by the same panorama of great white buildings reflected in a blinding sea. The only difference was that all the movements of Hungary's busy port, all the hum of countless factories was stilled; commercial life had expired, save in a few drowsy, half-empty shops; scarcely a cab or a horse remained to disturb the silence of the grass-grown streets. It might have been Pompeii or the Zuider Zee.

But Fiume could claim to be the citadel of youth. Nearly everybody

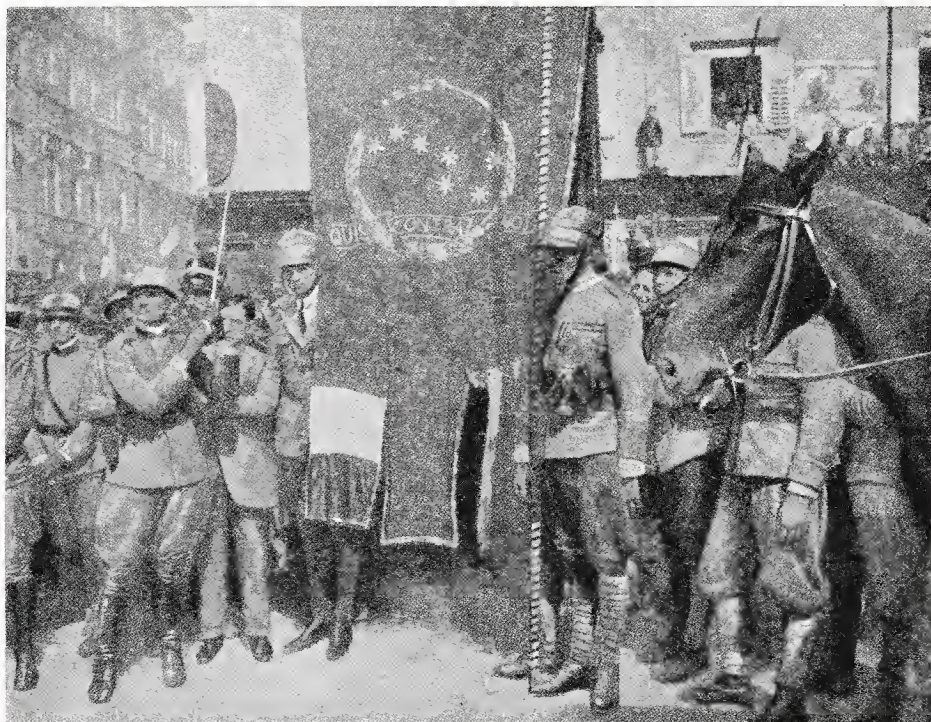
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looked about eighteen, walked at six miles an hour, was discourteous without being rude. More elderly citizens tried to look like the Commandant, with tiny chin beards, bald heads, defiant attitudes. He himself lived in a palace at the top of a very steep hill. Sentinels stood with sharp black bayonets at the gates, on the stairs, and all over the building. They challenged me, they challenged you, they challenged the Commandant's ministers and secretaries and nymmidons. Desultory youths thronged every ante-chamber, busily strumming typewriters or decorating copies of the official bulletin with rubber stamps or denying their existence on the telephone. It was much more like a newspaper office than a government house. And the government of this little state was conducted on strictly journalistic lines.

Almost the only thing lacking in the city was cloth, and the consequence

was that the legionaries were clad in keeping with their comic-opera surroundings. The luckiest wore bright terra-cotta khaki, suggestive of window-blinds, a legacy of the expelled Annamites, but the substitute uniforms included sailcloth, sporting tweeds, striped and speckled cotton, almost everything except charmeuse. The breeches were so wide that they could stow away an infinity of loot, or at least a week's rations. Some of the tunics were like overcoats, others like small boys' jackets. Occasionally you met a brave whose neck suggested that of a young lady at a ball.

Nearly all grew their hair like Polish pianists; some were bareheaded, others had tin helmets or cocks' feathers, but the majority poised the black Arditi fez acrobatically at the very back of their heads, with a long, black tassel wagging in the breeze. It was only after some months that



FIUME'S PROUD DEFIANCE UNDER D'ANNUNZIO: "WHO IS AGAINST US?"

On the first anniversary of his occupation of the Adriatic port, Gabriele d'Annunzio's troops demonstrated in the town, displaying the Fiuman flag. Flown vertically instead of horizontally, this was made of dark red material with, in gold, the constellation of the Great Bear encircled by a serpent swallowing its tail, and, on a ribbon, the motto "*Quis contra nos?*"—Who is against us?

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the Commandant was able to make a rich addition to his stores by an exploit of his emissaries at Catania. They boarded a tramp steamer with romantic secrecy, overpowered the crew, and brought her to Fiume. As the poet's commander-in-chief said to me: "We

his dictatorship d'Annunzio bluffed Italy with a demand for annexation and an offer to retire, but when Italy accepted he called a plébiscite. It went against him by three or four to one. Then he had the voting papers locked up, saying he refused to trust "vile Italy." And

no one seemed to mind.

One of his constitutions was a declamatory rhapsody about cabbages and kings; there were fairyland provisions for the appointment of officials, with titles that might have been taken from "Through the Looking-Glass" or "Gulliver's Travels"; music was constituted the State religion; a huge amphitheatre was to be built for free operatic performances; and, if any hitch occurred, seven "rectors" were to take seven mops and sweep away the whole document and hand over plenary powers to the poet.

Never was a man so ubiquitous. His day must have consisted of at least forty-eight hours, for all through the twenty-four he was exhibiting himself in the streets and public resorts, waving flags from the balcony of his palace, delivering fiery speeches, receiving deputations, celebrating anniversaries, holding reviews, opening

public buildings. And yet he found time to write most of his newspapers, compose manifestoes for all the walls of his town, talk, talk, talk incessantly with legionaries and citizens, eat, drink, and be merry. He contrived to be not only in every street but on every tongue.

Yet what a human mountebank! There was a gala performance of one of his own plays at the theatre, crowded with legionaries. In the middle of the second act he raised his hand in his



ONE OF D'ANNUNZIO'S ARDITI ON GUARD

Among the legionaries who helped d'Annunzio to take Fiume, Zara, and Susak, were a number of Arditi, volunteers for any dangerous work that might want doing. They presented a striking contrast to the irregulars in shorts shown on page 2094.

have to do a little piracy now and then; no one helps us, so we help ourselves."

It was in this spirit of filibustering gaiety that d'Annunzio governed Fiume. He was an absolute despot, and issued fantastic edicts in the most lurid language of melodrama. There were all sorts of councils and elected bodies and nominal jurisdictions, but all gave way to the poet, or else they found the climate did not suit them, and they took a hasty departure. Once during



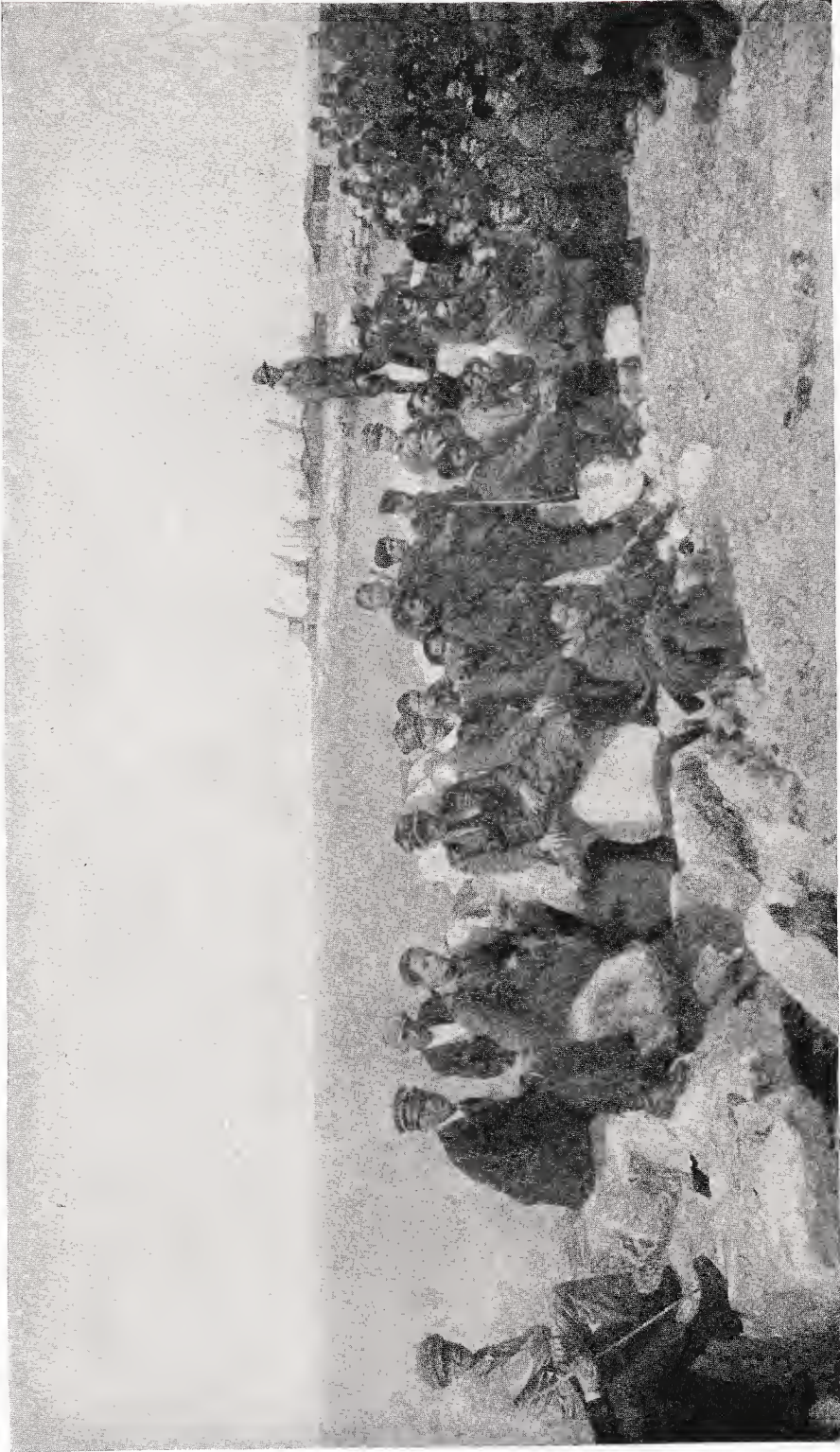
FIUME'S POET-DICTATOR, GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO

One of the greatest of Italian authors, Gabriele d'Annunzio, fired into flaming passion by German vandalism in the Great War, became a daring airman and, further angered by delay in the settlement of Fiume's future by the Peace Conference, occupied the port in 1919, declared it annexed to Italy, and remained its Dictator until the close of 1920



LIGHTLY CLAD GUARDS OF GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO'S FORCE AT FIUME

In occupying and "annexing" Fiume to Italy in 1919, Gabriele d'Annunzio acted in defiance of the Italian Government as well as of the Peace Conference. In the result Italian troops were sent against him and some fighting took place, notably in December, 1920. D'Annunzio carried on propaganda work by means of leaflets dropped from aeroplanes. One of his manifestoes was worded: "Italy celebrates Christmas by making havoc of the Italians in the Fiume of Italy." Gabriele



OCCUPATION OF SUSAK BY D'ANNUNZIO AND HIS ARDITI

When the Great War, in which he distinguished himself as an intrepid airman and lost the sight of one eye, was over, d'Annunzio, inspired by thoughts of Mazzini and Garibaldi, as well as by anger at the delay of the peace-makers, made his memorable attempt to hold Fiume for Italy. In the fighting that ensued he escaped with a slight head wound. Among his followers the Arditi were conspicuous, and their occupation of Susak caused the Serbs, who also claimed Fiume, to prepare to defend themselves by force and to address a formal protest to the Allies

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box and cried: "Enough of this tedious trash! Let us now proceed to sing patriotic songs." And the unfortunate mummerys had to join in the choruses.

D'Annunzio has always been a past master of nicknames. At Fiume he christened his supper-haunt the *Ornithorhyncus*; his restaurant and his legionaries were called *Ironheads*; cherry-brandy was "*Blood of the Morlacchi*" or ancient *Illyrians*; Fiume was "*the holocaust city*."

Dance in Honour of S. Vitus

But during his reign it certainly conveyed few impressions of sacrifice. There were theatres and music-halls, and military sports and banquets, and public receptions of deputations from all parts of Italy. I fared sumptuously every day in the gardens of the *Ironhead* restaurant on fresh caviare, *scampi* (the famous fish of the *Quarnero*), luscious fruits, and the best Hungarian wines. After the seizure of the tramp steamer, bread cost one-third of its price outside. The guaranteed Fiume corona was worth two or three times the crowns of Austria or Dalmatia.

I do not know when I have been quite so much amused as when I found the great festival of Fiume was in honour of S. Modest and S. Vitus, the joint patrons of the holocaust city. S. Vitus could be understood because once upon a time Fiume bore the Latin name of *Fanum Sancti Viti ad Flumen*, but the irony of S. Modest coupled with the flamboyant apparition of Gabriele d'Annunzio seemed absurdly incongruous. However, he disarmed all criticism by proclaiming an all-night dance in the public square in honour of S. Vitus.

Fairy Scenes in the Bay by Night

Neither he nor anybody else in Fiume except myself seemed to have noticed how appropriate this was, what a dance of S. Vitus had been going on there ever since the legionaries snatched Fiume from the League of Nations.

Fiume is really very beautiful by night, and even Venetian serenades have scarcely surpassed the effect of Bengal lights and Chinese lanterns, and

showering rockets and fantastic flash-lights all over this fairy bay. There was a dance on board the good ship *Dante* in the harbour, another at the bathing establishment outside the harbour, and another on more democratic lines in the *Piazza Dante*, with lucky-bags on behalf of the *White Cross* and fruit-stalls for the thirsty. I noticed not a sour look or cross word among the peaceful crowds, who were content to dance and watch colour effects until dawn.

Of course, there were bickerings and treacheries and violent deeds under d'Annunzio's rule, but on the whole he contrived to keep his subjects as well as the whole world amused. And when the time came for him to bid farewell he was sincerely mourned. It is true that, day and night, he had scarcely ceased crying "*Fiume or Death!*"

Signing of the Treaty of Rapallo

But after November 12, 1920, when the Treaty of Rapallo was signed by the representatives of Italy and the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, there was little resistance, and Fiume became established as an independent State. Instead of baring his breast and inviting a hail of bullets once more, he declared that Italy no longer merited that he should die for her sake. Instead of "*Fiume or Death!*" his cry became "*Life and Love and the Lake of Garda!*"

In January he packed his savings and his treasures, entered a swift car, and fled through the night to his beloved Venice. And now the crowning sorrow of his exile seems to be that most of his riches were stolen by his faithful legionaries.

But Fiume survives, happier if more humdrum, with intermittent peace and reviving industries, once more an autonomous port, cherishing wild memories amid fragrant flowers and soothing seas. In June, 1921, by an agreement between Fiume, Italy, and Yugo-Slavia, the conditions of which included the port of *Barros*, equal rights were granted to all parties concerned, and later the delimitation of the area of the State was left to a special commission of Italians and Yugo-Slavs.